

Segregation in Carmi, Illinois

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Not many people know Carmi, Illinois, was once a place populated by many blacks, several of whom arrived as slaves. Today, only a handful of African Americans reside in the town of Carmi. A part of White County, Illinois, history has long been forgotten as if it never existed. What were the lives of African Americans like during the early to mid-1900s in a white community, and where have they gone?

African Americans living in White County, Illinois, during the 1920s and the 1930s endured a life of segregation. Most blacks lived in East Carmi across the Little Wabash River and on Clay Hill; while others lived in mixed neighborhoods in southwest Carmi and a few on the north side. At that time, there were several churches and one school for the blacks. Both grade school and high school children attended East Side School, which later became known as Lincoln School. The one-room school was built in 1874 and another room was added in 1904 for the high school students. Since the school was located near the Little Wabash, high water would rise every year causing the blacks to miss school. The school had two teachers; one taught first through sixth grade, while the other taught seventh through twelfth grade. Students were given a few books from other schools but never had the privilege of having new ones. East Side students did not have a basketball team until 1934 or 1935. They practiced outside in the yard and played scheduled games at the high school gym; although, they were not allowed to play against white teams. In 1938-1939, East Side beat Evansville's Lincoln basketball team which was considered to be very good. However, this was East Side's last year for basketball

due to the declining number of students. In 1950 East Side School closed; therefore, black children were admitted into the regular school system. Many of the blacks had already moved from Carmi to bigger cities in hopes of finding better jobs and being accepted as American citizens. More blacks moved to keep their children from attending a white school while others passed away.

Margaret Dungy, an African American resident of Carmi, has lived through the segregation in White County. Her husband, Charles, graduated from East Side. He, like many others, found it embittering to walk past the new Washington School on his way to the black school knowing he would never enter Washington. Charles Jr., the Dungy's son, was the first and only black to attend first grade at Washington School in 1950. Margaret and others were a bit apprehensive when they had heard that a white lady did not want any blacks sitting next to her child. However, to Mrs. Dungy's surprise, the white children took Charles Jr. by his hand and led him off to play. He and others did well in a white school.

Several successful people attended East Side. One of those successful blacks was George Jefferson who graduated from East Side in 1924. As a graduate of the University of Illinois, George became a principal of a three-room school in Shawneetown, served in the U.S. Army during War World II, and served on the staff of Division of Vocational and Technical Ed. He wrote a book called *The Great Society and I*. George Cross was another successful person. He taught at East Side in 1947-48. After the school closed, he coached and taught at Venice for seven years. He later coached at Hadley Tech in St. Louis and became its principal and counselor. He was inducted into the St. Louis Sports Hall of Fame on April 27, 1977, for his outstanding coaching career and his contributions

to the athletic program in the St. Louis area. George Jefferson and George Cross are just two of the many who graduated from East Side and led a successful life.

Blacks' opinions on life in Carmi vary all the way from life was not "too bad" to others who were deeply bitter. A black man who once lived in Carmi but left out of fear and anger, vowed never to return said, "They kept telling me I was a second-class citizen, and there was no hope for me. For a long time when I came back here I wanted to throw up when I hit the city limits." However, his bitterness gave way to understanding and possibly pity for the whites. Most whites were raised to treat blacks the way they did. Blacks were not allowed into the hospitals. Indoor plumbing for the blacks was not common. They had to take baths outside in little tubs. Another black man recalled that a white boy once called his little sister "nigger". He then knocked the white boy into the creek and he did not dare walk down Main Street for a month. "There was a saying that states: Light and bright, you're all right; Brown, you can stick around; Black, you gotta get back."

Others claimed life was not "too bad" for blacks. There were not many jobs for African American men. However, some of the men did yard work, farmed, or worked for the railroad in Evansville. Some shined shoes at downtown barber shops while others did not work at all. Women supported the families by working for little pay by holding domestic positions with white families. Some of the establishments downtown would not serve the blacks, although they could spend their money and then leave. However, as time passed blacks were allowed into the white churches and other establishments. Whites and blacks visited one another's homes.

In conclusion, not many knew Carmi, Illinois, was once a place populated by African Americans. Many residents of White County, Illinois, have forgotten or have never known about the black population and the segregation that took place in Carmi, Illinois. It will always be in the minds of those who are still living and in the minds of their descendants. Mrs. Dungy believes you take what is handed to you in life, make the best of it, and let God lead you. [From Barry Cleveland, “Bitterness ran deep for black man from Carmi,” *White County Press*, May 30, 1980; Barry Cleveland, “There was militancy—but it was inside,” *White County Press*, June 5, 1980; Barry Cleveland, “We’re not bitter;’ blacks look back,” *White County Press*, May 23, 1980; Ernest Fechtig, School Bulletin Com. Unit District #5, vol. 7 (Carmi, IL, May 16, 1977) Number 37; and Student historian’s interview with Margaret Dungy, Sept. 8, 2006.]